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ABSTRACT

Urban problems have been discussed for so long and with so little effect that the litany of urban crisis is now a hollow incantation. One way out is to go back to the neighborhoods and experience "urban problems" as they affect particular people and places. The author's own street-level perspective was gained in five months of field work on the Lower East Side of New York City. Today the area includes Jewish concentrations, Puerto Ricans, Blacks, some Italians, a burgeoning Chinese population, and Polish and Ukranian neighborhoods. To walk the streets of the lower East Side is to see the urban past and how it has evolved--both changing and unchanged--into the present. As a participant-observer in one urban neighborhood, the author tried to answer four different sorts of questions: (1) How did Government programs affect the neighborhood? (2) What was the impact of street-level bureaucrats' in the area? (3) How did local residents adapt to life in their neighborhood? (4) How did neighborhood organizations respond to local problems? The sidewalk observer's most important realization is that citizen resources and energies remain a powerful but still latent force at the street level and that there is little being done in City Hall to build neighborhood democracy on the foundation. (Author/JM)

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# CITY HALL AND THE NEIGHBORHOODS: A STREET-LEVEL VIEW OF URBAN PROBLEMS

by Douglas Yates*

Urban problems have been discussed for so long and with so little effect that the litany of urban crisis is now a hollow incantation. Words like welfare, poverty, and crime have become rhetorical talismans to be dangled in arguments about the condition and future of the cities. As a result, the words and the human problems they refer to have become vague and abstract. They have lost the ability to convey the meaning of daily life on the sidewalks of New York or Chicago or Detroit.

One way out of this conceptual bind is to go back to the neighborhoods and experience "urban problems" as they affect particular people and places. The object is to develop a worm's eye view of the city that will complement and enrich the bird's eye view of planners and government officials. In fact, a street-level view of city government and urban problems is both chastening and instructive. It reveals the limits of government programs and City Hall thinking as it illuminates the resources and energies available in the neighborhood.

The author's own street-level perspective was gained in five months of field work on the Lower East Side of New York City. The Lower East Side, the 19th century "Portal to America," is now as then a "melting pot" that has not melted. Although the great bridges divide the area and symbolize movement beyond the seedbed of immigrant New York, the old ethnic communities remain and new ones have grown up. Today the area includes Jewish concentrations in the middle-income housing projects and in the older buildings of East Broadway; Puerto Rican concentrations in the old tenements, blacks in the housing projects, and along Avenue D, some Italians in what is left of Little Italy; a burgeoning Chinese population

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in and around Chinatown; and Polish and Ukranian neighborhoods around Tompkins Square. To walk the streets of the Lower East Side is to see the urban past and how it has evolved--both changing and unchanged--into the present.

As a participant-observer in one urban neighborhood, the author tried to answer four different sorts of questions:

(1) How did government programs affect the neighborhood?
(2) What was the impact of "street-level bureaucrats" in the area?
(3) How did local residents adapt to life in their neighborhood?
(4) How did neighborhood organizations respond to local problems?

The street-level observer's first reaction is that city government is surprisingly invisible in the neighborhood. One sees few policemen, firemen, or garbagemen. Government storefronts abound but go unnoticed and unused; and the public works (housing and parks), built mainly during the La Guardia and Wagner Administrations, no longer create an impression of government intervention or government-induced progress and change. The schools play an intrusive yet aloof role in the neighborhood. They break up blocks and create dead-spots in street life while at the same time appearing to be the fortress outposts of a foreign government.

Neighborhood residents do not think much about government per se although they often react to specific service delivery problems (such as garbage pickups, fires, or crimes). What this means is that for the average neighborhood resident, the sound and fury at City Hall about new programs, new administrative structures, and new directions in neighborhood government are largely meaningless. Since residents have little conception of government as a planning and decision-making body but only perceive the tangible impacts or outcomes of government policy, they tend to believe that nothing has changed in the neighborhood. While the Mayor

is building a new "City in a Hall" downtown, neighborhood people go shopping, sit in the park, play basketball, and play in the streets.

Thus, even when government is carrying out ambitious new projects, it is very hard for it to substantially reshape the fabric of an urban neighborhood. In particular, it is very hard for government to create the appearance of action, change, and progress. In a small city like New Haven, an energetic mayor could rebuild large areas of his city--for better or worse. In New York, public works that would cover several square miles *if* built in one place, are swallowed up by the sameness and intransigence of the slum. At the same time, it is interesting to discover how many residents see their neighborhood as a good place to live. Little do they know or care that government planners, using "objective criteria," believe it to be a deteriorated slum that is growing worse all the time. Nor do those who live in public housing projects always feel that they have been sentenced to a social imprisonment in vertical ghettoes. Rather, residents often speak positively of solid walls, sunlight, good garbage collection, and a rat-free environment. By contrast, some who live in the old tenements down the street speak with enthusiasm mixed with envy of the prospect of living in public housing. "I don't know why there aren't more Spanish people in the projects," said one Puerto Rican leader. "They want to get in and are angry that people from out of the area are brought in when there are vacancies."

So here is a neighborhood that many officials feel is falling apart, but that many residents view as home with a definite pride of place. The reason for these conflicting images is that two levels of experience and two angles of vision are at work. City officials and some of the neighborhood leaders who must deal with officials tend to speak in generalized terms of substandard housing and crime and reading scores. The residents speak of their day-to-day experience with faulty plumbing, the addict on their front stoop, and the nasty fourth grade teacher. One resident said:

> People from the neighborhood keep coming around and want me to go to meetings about housing problems. I tell them the plaster is falling off the wall and my hot water doesn't work. So then they ask me to come to the meeting again and I say my plaster is still falling. They say they can't do anything

> about my plaster until they talk about housing in the neighborhood. I say I'm not worrying about housing until someone fixes my plaster. There's no way they're going to make this a beautiful neighborhood if they can't fix my plaster.

The dilemma here is a real and important one: Do you have to solve large problems before you solve small ones or can you only solve large problems by solving a number of small ones? The difficulty too is that if a neighborhood organization tries to solve the systematic problems and fails, it may not produce any concrete services or build up a rank of grateful supporters at the street level. On the other hand, if the organization deals only with small, easily solvable problems, it may never address the wider issues that shape the neighborhood decisively in the first place.

For many neighborhood residents on the Lower East Side, the most important complaint about government is that it is unresponsive. Since residents tend to personalize their relations with government, this complaint was directed at what Lipsky has called the "streetlevel bureaucrats": policemen, garbagemen, and teachers. In the view of residents, these street-level bureaucrats (or what I would call the Mayor's footsoldiers) are not sensitive to their needs and in two repeated phrases, "don't come around here," and "aren't around when you need them." A related theme is that residents do not trust the street-level representatives of government and thus do not look to them for help. This lack of trust is manifest in different ways in different subneighborhoods. Among the non-white minority groups, white footsoldiers are viewed as indifferent if not hostile. One resident said: "They drive in here in the morning, make their money, and leave. What do they care about us?" Or more bitterly: "They are here to keep us quiet. They're like zookeepers and they think we're animals." In white neighborhoods, the trust problem typically derives from a sense that teachers, firemen, and especially policemen have "gone to pot," are not what they used to be in a remembered or imagined past. Older white residents regret the loss of a personal relationship with uniformed public employees. And it is in this sense that the "cop on the beat" has a social and psychological importance that goes beyond the simple demand for better police protection. The further effect is that not knowing any policemen or firemen in a face-

to-face relationship, residents are often unable or unwilling to deal with the footsoldiers when they have a real need to do so. And for this reason, the trust problem aggravates the responsiveness problem since it is difficult for footsoldiers to be responsive to local needs (even if they wanted to be) when residents do not report their crime problems and service complaints.

The Mayor and his footsoldiers have attempted to deal with the responsiveness and trust problems on the Lower East Side, but their efforts have been largely ineffectual. The attempt to make city government more responsive was made through the Mayor's Urban Action Task Force and through Neighborhood City Halls. The idea of retailing city services at the neighborhood level seems simple and logical enough--at least at first glance. For if City Hall is seen as being too remote and unresponsive, it stands to reason that a local office equipped to deal with service problems would bring government "closer to the people." Viewed from City Hall, the task is to identify neighborhoods, find a suitable spot for an office, and then set up shop. The hoped-for result is that residents will take advantage of the greater accessibility of government, report their problems, and that the street-level "ombudsmen" will then press the bureaucracy to produce a remedy.

In actuality, this hopeful scenario was far from accurate. For one thing, the idea of a Little City Hall depends on the premise that government is easily accessible, within "easy walking distance" for residents. But once the simple logistics of walking distance are calculated, it turns out that the office is only directly accessible to residents living in a radius of a few city blocks. Moreover, there is no assurance in a neighborhood of any size that an office in one section will be known to residents in another. The Lower East Side undoubtedly looks like a small community in City Hall, but it probably looks like a sprawling area on Hester Street. The inherent problem of retailing services in this way was borne out by residents who were asked if they knew about the Mayor's Task Force office. In a sidewalk sample of 100 residents, only *four* knew about the office. People who lived on the same street that the office was located were unaware of it. Policemen in the area could not identify it, and one lady was sure it had burned down the other day. It had not.

The footsoldiers' attempt to deal with the trust problems, while also logical in design, was no less disappointing. The Police Department worked through community relations officers, while the Fire Department created a Dialogue Program for the same purpose of stimulating "communication" with neighborhood residents. What happened with these programs was the policemen and firemen were able to reach out only to those established community leaders who were likely to have worked with them before or to those who did not cause problems for them in the first place. The result was a closed circle of communication that did not include those residents who mistrusted the city government or those who were harassing firemen or pulling false alarms--much less committing crimes or refusing to report them.

The Fire Department's Dialogue Program shows poignantly the City's dilemma in acting unilaterally to improve communication and cooperation with the community. The idea of the Dialogue Program was to get young neighborhood residents together with firemen to talk about problems and complaints. In particular, the firemen wanted to talk about false alarms and harassment in the course of getting to know "kids in the neighborhood" and letting them know about the fireman's job. The firemen and the kids set out for a [illegible] night of "dialogue" at Hart Island, a city-owned island in Long [illegible]ound. As an outing, the program was a pleasant interlude from [illegible] city streets. But the dialogue itself clearly lacked the app[illegible] success of the hot dogs and basketball. The firemen quickly concluded that they were dealing with the "good kids"--not the ones that were causing trouble. When asked why they pulled false alarms, the neighborhood "representatives" said that the "older kids" did it. Why? "For fun," "to see the trucks come," "to make things happen." "What else?" the fireman pressed, unconvinced. "Well," said one 15-year-old, "we hate the . . . [police] and want to get back at them. But you can't mess with them--they hassle you. So we hassle the firemen. They don't carry guns and can't fight back."

Somewhat pleased that they might be only innocent surrogates, the firemen discussed the police problem intently with their young friends, and by the end both sides had found a new common ground if not mutual understanding in the discovery of a convenient, mutual scapegoat. Once again

there was a narrow circle of "communication" and, whatever the role of the police in producing amity at Hart Island, it was clear that dialogue would not affect harassment and false alarms.

What makes the trust problem especially difficult for the footsoldiers to deal with is that it is double-edged: The footsoldiers mistrust the residents, too. This mistrust arises from the footsoldiers' sense that they were working in a hostile environment, and it is reinforced by harassment and verbal abuse. More subtly, the mistrust is enhanced by the footsoldiers sense that they do not understand what makes their non-white clients "tick." Among the policemen or firemen with memories of the neighborhood in an earlier period, there is often a troubling lack of recognition. "I don't know what's happened; things have fallen apart since I grew up here." Or "you never know when someone is going to start yelling at you or people are going to start fighting and cutting. It's totally unpredictable." Most important, firemen, policemen, and teachers cannot understand why their work is not appreciated and respected. This is especially true for firemen who see themselves as selfless defenders of life and property. One fireman said:

> . . . we risk our lives every day to pull people out of buildings and save their possessions. Now we don't have to be treated like heroes. It's our job and we get paid for it. But when people throw rocks at you and scream at you, it's pretty hard to understand. You have to wonder what we ever did to those people to deserve that kind of treatment. It makes me sick when I think about it.

So the interaction between City Hall and the neighborhoods that takes place mainly between what Albert Reiss has called the "servers and the served"--is one of mutual mistrust and one in which "lack of responsiveness" and "lack of respect" are the complementary expressions of a troubled relationship. The chastening lesson of the two experiments in bringing government closer to the people is that City Hall has a very limited ability to affect street-level problems and perceptions through a retail service strategy and by better public relations.

Nevertheless, this failure of City Hall to alter street-level relationships does not mean that nothing can be done about neighborhood problems. In fact, the participant-observer quickly realizes that most of the

very fruitful attempts to deal with neighborhood problems are devised spontaneously by local residents. In urban government, and at higher levels, the view often exists that only institutionalized government can deal with social problems--usually through the commitment of new resources. But on the Lower East Side, at the level of day-to-day problems, it is neighborhood residents who turn stoops and cars into recreation areas, sidewalks and streets into playing fields, and unadorned playground basketball courts into neighborhood institutions. Compared with this resourcefulness and adaptiveness, city efforts, such as the "vest-pocket parks" seem artificial and lifeless. While City Hall officials invent new experiments and strategies, neighborhood residents adapt skillfully to their problems every day. Elderly people travel together to avoid street crime, while residents of another block buy police whistles for collective self-defense. And, on hot summer days, the children of the neighborhood invent uses for the fire hydrant that make firemen, who would like to keep the water for other purposes, scratch their heads.

Thus, there are street-level resources that are used every day to adapt to unpleasant conditions and to affect residents' lives in specific ways. If Model Cities programs could make the same claim, they might not be viewed by residents as patronage boondoggles, if indeed they are known and viewed at all. Seen in this light, one role of decentralization is (or at least should be) to stimulate the development of street-level resources. Unhappily, decentralization has not always worked that way--at least on the Lower East Side. The problem is not that there is a lack of community organization. Quite to the contrary. Daniel Bell's "community revolution" has certainly taken place on the Lower East Side and the area now teems with new storefront organizations, tenants councils, and block associations, as well as with older institutions, such as the settlement houses, PTA's, and Mobilization For Youth. The problem with decentralization, as it exists in community boards, community corporations, and the community school board, is that it has often led not to more powerful neighborhood action but to fierce internal conflict and to frustrating skirmishes with City Hall. The reason for this is that the effect of establishing community-wide forums is to force existing groups with limited constituencies to fight for a place in a community-wide

power structure. Put another way, the result of decentralization is often a futile attempt to create a single community interest where previously and, in fact, disparate interests exist. In this context, the resources and energies devoted to neighborhood action are diverted to local power struggles and conflict resolution. This pattern has been particularly acute on the Lower East Side with its myriad community organizations and with its distinct Polish, Jewish, Black, Puerto Rican, and Chinese subneighborhoods. In particular, in the community board and the community school board, participation has meant an open and bitter fight between different ethnic groups, greater polarization, and at times a total collapse in neighborhood decisionmaking.

At present, the future of decentralization is at best unclear. The troubles over school administration, the waning of federal involvement in urban problems, and the increased national fixation on street crime militate against further experimentation with neighborhood government. What is clear from the experience of the Lower East Side is first that responsiveness and trust problems can only be solved at the street level with the cooperation and involvement of neighborhood residents, and second that neighborhood leaders and residents have important resources for problem solving and collective action. At the same time, it is clear that decentralization is obviously not a panacea and that in some forms it may have negative consequences. In particular, the idea of neighborhood government as City Hall government-in-miniature is likely to produce stalemate and anger in a divided neighborhood like the Lower East Side. The sidewalk observer's most important realization is that citizen resources and energies remain a powerful but still latent force at the street level and that there is little being done in City Hall to build neighborhood democracy on that foundation.